

# University of St. Thomas Law Journal

---

Volume 4  
Issue 3 *Spring 2007*

Article 12

---

2007

## The Problem with Unpaid Work

Katharine K. Baker

---

### Bluebook Citation

Katharine K. Baker, *The Problem with Unpaid Work*, 4 U. St. Thomas L.J. 599 (2007).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UST Research Online and the University of St. Thomas Law Journal. For more information, please contact [lawjournal@stthomas.edu](mailto:lawjournal@stthomas.edu).

## ARTICLE

# THE PROBLEM WITH UNPAID WORK

KATHARINE K. BAKER\*

I. Why the Difference? .....	601
A. Biology .....	601
B. Gender as Social Construction .....	605
II. What's Wrong With Difference? .....	608
A. The Opt-Outs .....	609
B. The Remaining Disproportionate Division of Unpaid Labor .....	612
1. It's Not About Money .....	612
2. It is About the Norm .....	617
a. Challenging the Norm .....	617
b. Erosion of Progress .....	620
III. Conclusion .....	623

This volume is dedicated to questions arising from the integration of market work and family life. At the outset, there are three substantial pieces of good news for those concerned about the ability of families to combine paid work and parenting responsibilities. First, mothers spent *more* time in interactive play<sup>1</sup> with their children in 2000 than they did in 1965.<sup>2</sup> Mothers have not sacrificed quality parenting time in order to accommodate their work schedules. Second, fathers devoted twice as much time to child care in 2000 as they did in 1965.<sup>3</sup> Third, the overall amount of domestic work performed declined considerably. Married mothers spent fifteen fewer

---

\* Professor and Associate Dean, Chicago-Kent College of Law. Thanks, as always, to Lucy Moss for exemplary research assistance and Michelle Oberman for exemplary everything-else assistance. All mistakes are my own.

1. In the most recent, exhaustive study of the allocation of time in households with children, Suzanne Bianchi, John Robinson and Melissa Milkie define interactive play as "investment" or "enrichment" activities such as reading, teaching and playing with children. Interactive play can be contrasted with "routine" care, which involves activities like bathing, dressing and transporting children. SUZANNE M. BIANCHI ET AL., *CHANGING RHYTHMS OF AMERICAN FAMILY LIFE* 65 (2006).

2. *Id.* at 66.

3. *Id.*

hours each week performing core housework than they did in 1965.<sup>4</sup> In other words, what has changed is how much time women spend sweeping the floor and how often they order pizza for dinner—not how much they read to their children. That is the good news.

Here is the troubling news. Mothers still average sixty-seven percent of the unpaid work in a household while fathers average sixty-four percent of the paid hours for a household.<sup>5</sup> Mothers still do twice as much child care as do fathers.<sup>6</sup> The wage gap between men and women narrowed in the last four decades from about forty percent to between twenty-one and twenty-four percent,<sup>7</sup> but the rate of narrowing has slowed considerably since the 1980s.<sup>8</sup>

More importantly, the wage gap, as usually measured, only incorporates workers who work full time on a weekly or an annual basis.<sup>9</sup> It thus excludes people (mostly women) who work part time and may exclude people who work full time but not year-round (many teachers, for instance). A measure of the earnings gap for all prime-aged (age 26-59) workers, including those who have left the workforce for some period of time, shows a wage gap of sixty-two percent.<sup>10</sup> That is, in prime earning years, women earn thirty-eight cents for every dollar men earn.

Given women's and men's different work patterns, this large gap may not be that surprising. Between 1983 and 1998, more than half of all women, but only sixteen percent of men, reported one full year of no earnings.<sup>11</sup> Thirty percent of women reported more than four years of zero earnings, while only .05 percent of men reported that many years out of the labor force.<sup>12</sup> Even the women most strongly attached to the workforce, measured by those who reported earnings for every year in their prime earning years, reported working nearly five hundred fewer hours per year than men.<sup>13</sup>

These stark statistics give rise to at least two questions. First, given what appears to be a strong political and legal commitment to gender equality, why do we continue to have such a profound disparity between the amount of paid and unpaid work men and women do? The second and, in my view, much harder question, is whether there is anything wrong with

---

4. *Id.* at 91.

5. *Id.* at 176.

6. *Id.* at 66.

7. Heidi Hartmann et al., *How Much Progress in Closing the Long-Term Earnings Gap?*, in THE DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER? 125, 126 (Francine D. Blau et al. eds., 2006) [hereinafter DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE].

8. Francine D. Blau & Lawrence M. Kahn, *The Gender Pay Gap: Going, Going . . . but Not Gone*, in DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE, *supra* note 7, at 37, 40.

9. Hartmann et al., *supra* note 7, at 126.

10. *Id.* at 131. These statistics were based on the fifteen-year period between 1983–1998.

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

that gendered disparity. Part I of this short essay discusses two standard explanations, one biological and one patriarchal, for why women do more unpaid work than men. Although both the biological and patriarchal explanations for why women and men perform different labor are well-known, neither explanation has paid enough attention to whether there is something wrong with the gendered division of work. People who use the biological explanation often assume that biology answers the normative question, which it does not; people who use the patriarchal explanation often assume that the normative question is easy, and I will suggest that it may not be.

Part II of this essay addresses the normative question. What is wrong with a system in which women regularly do more unpaid work than men? It addresses that question both for those women who opt out of the paid workforce completely (at least for a significant period of time), and for the much larger class of women who combine paid and unpaid work but still perform the lion's share of the unpaid work in the home. Part II suggests that encouraging women to opt out of the paid work force entirely is problematic both because it impedes the efforts of others to strike a meaningful balance between work and family, and because it puts insufficient pressure on the workplace to afford more flexibility for workers. Part II also suggests that it is problematic for women to engage in paid work but continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid household work. A ubiquitous gendered division of unpaid work norm has real consequences for women. To the extent that women choose to accept this norm, they run the risk of losing many of the gains women have made toward equality with men. To the extent women wish to challenge this norm seriously by doing less unpaid work, they may well have to put their children and marriages in jeopardy. Unfortunately, the law's ability to alleviate this predicament is limited because an effective challenge to the gendered division of unpaid household work norm most likely has to come from those living and working within the household itself.

## I. WHY THE DIFFERENCE?

### A. *Biology*

Evolutionary biology provides a very straightforward explanation for why women and men devote different amounts of energy to unpaid caretaking. Indeed, the unequal division of unpaid work seems perfectly natural from a biological perspective because motherhood and fatherhood do not look at all alike when viewed through a biological lens. A mother, at least a mammalian mother, invests much more in every gamete than does a father because much more energy goes into making one egg than one sperm.<sup>14</sup> A mother, at least a mother in any species that fertilizes and gestates inter-

---

14. RICHARD DAWKINS, *THE SELFISH GENE* 141-42 (1989).

nally, must also invest substantially in feeding and protecting the embryo before it is ever born.<sup>15</sup> Thus, even before birth, a mother has invested much more in each child than has a father. At birth, biology and numerous cultural adages tell us that because fertilization happens internally, a male can never be completely sure that he is the father of a child.<sup>16</sup> Because he can never be sure that any given child does carry his genetic material, he is less likely to invest in a born child than is a mother who, because she gave birth to the baby, knows that the child carries her genetic material. Thus, if the reason humans are drawn to procreate stems from an unconscious desire to pass on genetic material, men's best strategy is to spread his genes widely,<sup>17</sup> while women's best strategy is to invest heavily in each born offspring in order to ensure its survival.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, human mothers used to always, and now usually, nurse infants. The process of nursing requires the mother to spend huge amounts of time with the child; it helps the mother feel close to the child,<sup>19</sup> and it soothes the child. The child becomes used to being soothed by the mother. The mother develops child-specific expertise that makes her particularly good at soothing the child. Once the mother clearly has greater child-specific expertise, it often seems more efficient for her to care for the child because she is simply better at it than is someone who has not had the opportunity to nurse and bond with the child.<sup>20</sup> Thus, biology provides an uncomplicated and well-known narrative that can readily explain why women are more likely to take care of children than are men.

---

15. See generally Robert L. Trivers, *Parental Investment and Sexual Selection*, in *SEXUAL SELECTION AND THE DESCENT OF MAN* 136, 139 (Bernard Campbell ed., 1972).

16. David M. Buss, *Sexual Conflict: Evolutionary Insights into Feminism and the "Battle of the Sexes,"* in *SEX, POWER, CONFLICT* 296, 302 (David M. Buss & Neil M. Malamuth eds., 1996) ("Because fertilization occurs internally within women, men are always less than 100% 'certain' . . . that their putative children are genetically their own. Some cultures have phrases to describe this, such as 'mama's baby, papa's maybe.'"). Genetic testing now makes paternal certainty possible, but reliable genetic testing is very recent.

17. See DAWKINS, *supra* note 14, at 146-47 ("[T]here will normally be some evolutionary pressure on males to invest a little bit less in each child and to try to have more children by different wives.").

18. *Id.* at 146 (explaining that because a woman invests more in a child at first and at every stage, the cost of them losing a child is greater than the cost to a male, so she is more likely to expend more resources in parenting).

19. See LOUIS GENEVIE & EVA MARGOLIES, *THE MOTHERHOOD REPORT: HOW WOMEN FEEL ABOUT BEING MOTHERS* 95, 100-09 (1987) (childbirth and nursing are often emotionally charged and even erotic experiences for many women); SARA RUDDICK, *MATERNAL THINKING* 18 (1989) (mothers are often amazed at how passionately they feel about their babies). Not all women experience the intensity of this connection. As Mary Becker wrote, "Many women feel differently about different babies, or become passionately involved at different points in babyhood for different babies. There is an enormous range of responses. But most women feel differently about their babies—more strongly, more intensely—than most men." Mary Becker, *Maternal Feelings: Myth, Taboo and Child Custody*, 1 S. CAL. REV. L. & WOMEN'S STUD. 133, 143 (1992).

20. See RHONA MAHONEY, *KIDDING OURSELVES: BREADWINNING, BABIES, AND BARGAINING POWER* 79-80, 111-12 (1995) (discussing the gains from specialization that parents receive when only one parent focuses on childcare).

The biological story also fleshes out why men may be more likely to engage in paid work. Men further their own genetic goals by demonstrating their own success or potential for success.<sup>21</sup> Men are attractive to women when they appear to be able to provide ample resources for offspring.<sup>22</sup> The more a man demonstrates his prowess vis-à-vis other men, the more a woman will feel confident of that man's ability to protect her and her offspring.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the argument goes, men care about resources and status; women care about babies.

There may be much to criticize in this highly abbreviated biological account, and there are very sound reasons not to use evolutionary biology too comprehensively when describing how human beings behave today.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, I think it is important to acknowledge the biological explanation of the gendered division of familial work because so many people believe it is relevant. Ask any parent shortly after the birth of his or her first child whether he or she thinks there is a biological component to attachment and, in my experience, both men and women will say (usually in hushed tones) "yes." Very successful, professional women who seem to defy many biological norms often invoke biology to explain their choices to opt out of, or cut back substantially from, their paid labor.<sup>25</sup> People speak reluctantly about biology either because they have been taught to believe that biology is not destiny or because they think it defeatist to assume that biology plays such a strong role in determining our predispositions.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, the biological explanation continues to surface.

---

21. David M. Buss, *Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences: Evolutionary Hypotheses Tested in 37 Cultures*, 12 BEHAV. & BRAIN SCI. 1, 12 (1989) ("Ambition and industriousness . . . tend to be valued more heavily by females than by males across cultures.").

22. *Id.* ("Females value the financial capacity of potential mates more than males do.").

23. Douglas T. Kenrick et al., *Power, Harassment and Trophy Mates: The Feminist Advantages of an Evolutionary Perspective*, in SEX, POWER, CONFLICT, *supra* note 16, at 29, 45 ("On any dimension related to social dominance, status, or resources, females were more selective . . .").

24. See Stephen Jay Gould, *Sociobiology and the Theory of Natural Selection*, in SOCIOBIOLOGY: BEYOND NATURE/NURTURE? 257 (George W. Barlow & James Silverberg eds., 1980); Katharine K. Baker, *Gender, Genes, and Choice: A Comparative Look at Feminism, Evolution, and Economics*, 80 N.C. L. REV. 465, 514 (2002) (evolutionary biology can be criticized for the methodological flaws one often finds in economics, namely, over-reliance on unitary metrics and presumptions of optimality).

25. Lisa Belkin, *The Opt-Out Revolution*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 26, 2003, at § 6 (Numerous highly-educated, elite women quoted in this article invoke biology to explain why they invest so much in child care: "[m]aybe evolution has endowed us with the ability to turn back our rheostat faster"; "It's all in the M.R.I.' . . . the brains of men and women 'light up' differently when they think or feel"; "I think we were born with these [mother/caregiver] feelings."). See also MARY BLAIR-LOY, *COMPETING DEVOTIONS: CAREER AND FAMILY AMONG WOMEN EXECUTIVES* 84 (2003) (quoting one woman who said, "Maybe it's genetic . . . I have more of a link [to my kids] than my husband does.").

26. See Belkin, *supra* note 25, at § 6 ("[S]o much of recent history (the civil rights movement, the women's movement) is an attempt to prove that biology is not destiny. To suggest otherwise is to resurrect an argument that can be—and has been—dangerously misused.").

This reticence people display for the biological argument is understandable given the historical misuse of biology, but the reluctance is misplaced. The fact of biological predisposition in no way condones the propriety or inevitability of biological roles. As those who strive to use evolutionary biology responsibly are quick to point out, “an is does not imply an ought”<sup>27</sup>: the fact that caretaker and provider roles may be rooted in biological differences in no way suggests that we must continue to let those roles map onto lived differences. After all, biological predisposition may explain many things—rape,<sup>28</sup> sexual harassment,<sup>29</sup> child abuse<sup>30</sup>—and virtually no one uses that predisposition to justify those activities. The law’s job, and society’s job, is to structure laws and norms that we endorse as good, fair and beneficial regardless of whether we have to buck biological predisposition to do so.

The problem is ascertaining what we think of as good, fair and beneficial when it comes to the division of unpaid work. Unlike rape, sexual harassment and child abuse, which are all wrong according to anyone’s moral code, the disproportionate division of household labor is not so obviously wrong.<sup>31</sup> Women do not work that much more than men;<sup>32</sup> they just work at different jobs. It may be wrong that men get market wages for their work when women do not, though as discussed in Part II, many women do get paid by their husbands for the work they perform in the house.<sup>33</sup> Other women, at least women in other countries, get state subsidies for the work they do in the household.<sup>34</sup> Thus, much of women’s unpaid work is com-

---

27. E.g., Owen D. Jones, *Behavioral Genetics and Crime, in Context*, 69 L. & CONTEMP. PROBS. 81, 94 (2006) (discussing what is known as the “naturalistic fallacy”).

28. RANDY THORNHILL & CRAIG T. PALMER, *A NATURAL HISTORY OF RAPE* (2000) (arguing that rape is reproductively beneficial to men and that men are, therefore, biologically inclined to do it).

29. Kingsley R. Browne, *An Evolutionary Perspective on Sexual Harassment: Seeking Roots in Biology Rather than Ideology*, 8 J. CONTEMP. LEGAL ISSUES 5, 23 (1997) (explaining the prevalence of sexual harassment as being due to the biological fact that men see the world “through sexual glasses”).

30. Owen D. Jones, *Evolutionary Analysis in Law: An Introduction and Application to Child Abuse*, 75 N.C. L. REV. 1117 (1997) (explaining that step-fathers are biologically inclined to abuse their step-children because they would rather the mother’s energies be devoted to her later (second husband’s) children).

31. Nancy Chodorow commented, “[p]sychoanalytically oriented psychologists and social psychologists with whom I have talked about [the reproduction of gender roles] have argued that there is nothing inherently *wrong* with a sexual division of functions or roles—with the sexual division of labor.” NANCY CHODOROW, *THE REPRODUCTION OF MOTHERING* 214 (1978) (emphasis in original).

32. The most recent studies suggest that women do work more than men, but, combining both paid and unpaid work, women only work seven more hours a week than men do (married women average seventy-one hours of combined paid and unpaid work per week; married fathers average sixty-four hours of combined paid and unpaid work). See BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 55. The authors of these studies classified this as “gender equality across mothers and fathers in overall workloads.” *Id.* at 169.

33. See *infra* notes 87–89 and accompanying text.

34. See *infra* notes 78–86 and accompanying text.

pensated, just not by the market. This makes it particularly hard to identify the wrong in the disproportionate distribution of unpaid work. Before analyzing that conundrum in more depth, though, it is helpful to evaluate the other standard explanation for the gendered division of labor. Perhaps it is not biology, but patriarchy, that explains men's and women's work patterns.

### B. Gender as Social Construction

Many theorists root women's continued disproportionate commitment to household labor in a system of sex inequality, male dominance or patriarchy—all of which operate by and through a system of gender that assigns different roles to men and women.<sup>35</sup> Although the origins of patriarchy have never been identified with scientific precision,<sup>36</sup> most feminists agree that a system of patriarchy operates such that men's roles get status and respect while women's do not.<sup>37</sup> Joan Williams describes gender as a force field that pulls women into more caretaking work than they actually want.<sup>38</sup> Implicit in Williams' discussion and in the title to her important book, *Unbending Gender*, is the assumption that this gender force field is problematic.<sup>39</sup> Other authors speak in starker terms. M. Rivka Polatnick writes: "It is to men's advantage that women are assigned childrearing responsibility, and it is in men's interest to keep things that way."<sup>40</sup> Nancy Chodorow writes: "The sexual division of labor and women's responsibility for child care are linked to and generate male dominance."<sup>41</sup> Julia Wood writes:

---

35. See SANDRA LIPSITZ BEM, *THE LENSES OF GENDER* 80–81 (1993) (indicating that gender systems assign mutually exclusive scripts to the masculine and feminine so as to legitimize and perpetuate differences on the basis of sex).

36. See GERDA LERNER, *THE CREATION OF PATRIARCHY* 212–29 (1986) (rooting patriarchy in a variety of historical and cultural forces); Veronica Beechey, *On Patriarchy*, 3 *FEMINIST REV.* 66, 69, 73 (1975) (describing the rather inadequate explanations that foundational feminists give for the origins of patriarchy, but explaining how they all share a belief that a system of patriarchy operates as a power system that allows men to dominate women). Catharine MacKinnon puts it this way:

[O]n the first day that matters, dominance was achieved, probably by force. By the second day, division along the same lines had to be relatively firmly in place. On the third day, if not sooner, differences were demarcated, together with social systems to exaggerate them in perception and in fact, *because* the system's differential delivery of benefits and deprivations required making no mistake about who was who.

CATHARINE MACKINNON, *FEMINISM UNMODIFIED* 40 (1987) (emphasis in original).

37. See LERNER, *supra* note 36, at 239.

Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women . . . . [I]t implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does *not* imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources.

(emphasis in original).

38. JOAN WILLIAMS, *UNBENDING GENDER: WHY FAMILY AND WORK CONFLICT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT* 245 (2000).

39. *Id.*

40. M. Rivka Polatnick, *Why Men Don't Rear Children: A Power Analysis*, in *MOTHERING: ESSAYS IN FEMINIST THEORY* 23 (J. Trebilcock ed., 1983).

41. CHODOROW, *supra* note 31, at 214.



“[e]ncouraging women to continue caring for others because it is good, it needs to be done and no one else will do it, [encourages women] to participate—or to continue participating—in their own subordination.”<sup>42</sup> Catharine MacKinnon explains the gendered distribution of anything, including work, this way: “gender is an inequality of power, a social status based on who is permitted to do what to whom.”<sup>43</sup>

For all of these theorists, it is clear that women’s disproportionate investment in domestic work is part of a system of gender designed to perpetuate male privilege. Thus, for these theorists, it is perfectly obvious why women’s work is not paid while men’s is paid. Men, who benefit from sex inequality, have no interest in affording women’s work a status that would compete with their own. Women do unpaid work because patriarchy affords them no choice. After all, who would choose to do unpaid labor?

Curiously, the answer to that question appears to be: many, many people. Of course, there are legitimate reasons to be skeptical of the freedom with which women make the choice to do so much unpaid work.<sup>44</sup> Women may “choose” to caretake because their parenting partner refuses to do so,<sup>45</sup> or because the workplace does not provide them an opportunity to balance minimal amounts of caretaking with work.<sup>46</sup> Accepting low-status work and subordination can seem like a perfectly rational choice when the alternative seems so radical, so potentially damaging to those one loves, and so unknown.<sup>47</sup> Seemingly ubiquitous gendered norms allow men the privilege of assuming that they do not have to caretake,<sup>48</sup> and they allow employers to demand very long hours from their workers.

Still, those who so readily emphasize the constraints within which women make the choice to do unpaid work must take a hard look at what contemporary patterns are telling us. For many, the choice to do unpaid

---

42. JULIA WOOD, WHO CARES?: WOMEN, CARE, AND CULTURE 166–67 (Robyn Laur Clark ed., 1994) (stating that few dispute the proposition that women do more care work than men); MARTHA ALBERTSON FINEMAN, THE NEUTERED MOTHER, THE SEXUAL FAMILY AND OTHER TWENTIETH CENTURY TRAGEDIES 162 (1995) (“[I]ntimacy and its maintenance have always been and continue to be disproportionately allocated to women.”); see Becker, *supra* note 19, at 154 (“Caretaking is done by women most of the time in most families.”).

43. MACKINNON, *supra* note 36, at 8.

44. See Joan Williams, *Gender Wars: Selfless Women in the Republic of Choice*, 66 N.Y.U. L. REV. 1559, 1612–32 (1991); Kathryn Abrams, *Ideology and Women’s Choices*, 24 GA. L. REV. 761, 765–66 (1990); Robin West, *Submission, Choice, and Ethics: A Rejoinder to Judge Posner*, 99 HARV. L. REV. 1449, 1455–56 (1986) (providing feminist critiques of choice).

45. See MAHONEY, *supra* note 20, at 44–45 (discussing the difficulty mothers face when bargaining with their spouses over who should accept child care responsibilities).

46. See WILLIAMS, *supra* note 38, at 66–77 (discussing how ideal worker norms require a commitment to the workplace that is inconsistent with minimal levels of caretaking).

47. See Becker, *supra* note 19, at 161 (“For women as a group, avoiding stress can mean accepting the status quo rather than pushing for change even, or especially, when it hurts.”).

48. See Joan Williams, *Deconstructing Gender*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 797, 831 (1989) (“Women know that if *they* do not sacrifice *no one* will, whereas men assume that if *they* do not, *women* will.”) (emphasis in original).

labor feels more like a luxury than a response to oppression. Many single mothers who do not have to worry about supporting or accommodating a spouse's schedule often express a desire to do *more* unpaid work.<sup>49</sup> Single mothers are more than twice as likely as married mothers to report sacrificing family time for work.<sup>50</sup> They wish they had more (unpaid) family time. Perhaps more powerfully, the women who are most likely to choose to do unpaid work exclusively appear to be those who have the most power, both within their relationship and in the workforce.

Today, a mother who was born between 1965 and 1979 and whose spouse earns more than \$120,000 a year is more likely than not to be at home full time.<sup>51</sup> The number of working mothers with children under age one fell between 1997 and 2000, and the drop was concentrated among white, well-educated women over age thirty.<sup>52</sup> Twenty-two percent of women with professional degrees do not work at all so that they can stay home with their children.<sup>53</sup> A survey of women from the Harvard Business School classes of 1981, 1985 and 1991 found that sixty-two percent worked part time or not at all.<sup>54</sup>

The above statistics suggest that highly-educated women are particularly likely to subordinate their market work to family work. This is especially notable because education level correlates with a belief in gender equity.<sup>55</sup> Espoused belief in gender equity, in turn, correlates with a more equal division of domestic duties, at least before children arrive.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the women with the highest levels of education, who are also likely to have the highest incomes and the strongest commitment to gender equality, are the ones who, before children arrive, are most likely to distribute household work evenly. Children change both these women's commitment to paid work and their commitment to ungendered work. This means that it is the

---

49. See BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 139–40. The authors indicate that almost thirty percent of single mothers report having made “a lot” of sacrifices in personal or family life for their job or career, though a greater number (forty-four percent) report also having made a lot of job sacrifices for family. Single women, quite understandably, have to make sacrifices in both their family and professional life, but, notably, a sizable number say that they wish they could spend more time with their families.

50. *Id.* at 139 (indicating that single mothers report sacrificing family for work more than married mothers do—that is, single mothers are less likely to be happy with whatever balance they have struck between work and family).

51. Claudia Wallis, *The Case for Staying Home*, TIME, Mar. 22, 2004, at 53.

52. *Id.* at 52.

53. *Id.*

54. Belkin, *supra* note 25, at 44.

55. See Richard J. Harris & Juanita Firestone, *Changes in Predictors of Gender Role Ideologies Among Women: A Multivariate Analysis*, 38 SEX ROLES 239, 240 (1998) (indicating that education level correlates with belief in gender equity for both men and women).

56. Theodore N. Greenstein, *Economic Dependence, Gender, and the Division of Labor in the Home: A Replication and Extension*, 62 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 322, 323–24 (2000) (stating that couples with expressed commitment to gender equity share domestic duties more evenly than do couples with less expressed commitment to gender equity).

women with the most social capital, the women with the greatest access to quality child care and the women in marriages with the greatest commitment to gender equality who are the ones choosing very traditional gender roles. It is hard to call this subordination.<sup>57</sup>

There is also a perfectly rational, non-gendered reason why these women may choose more traditional roles: they get to work a lot less. Married, non-employed mothers average fifty-two hours per week of total workload.<sup>58</sup> That is twenty-five percent less than married, employed mothers and nineteen percent less than employed or unemployed married fathers.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the women who choose not to do paid work are more in touch with reality. These women might very well respond to the feminist question, "who would choose to do unpaid work?" with a question of their own: "if one can afford *not* to do paid work, why do it?" As one former successful journalist who eventually chose to leave the workforce commented, "[s]ometimes I worry that we're really just a little bit lazier . . . but in my heart of hearts, I think it's really because we're smarter."<sup>60</sup>

Is there something problematic about the choice these women are making, regardless of whether it stems from sloth or savvy? As a policy matter, should we discourage women from opting out of the paid workforce and into very traditional gender roles? Part II analyzes that question and begins to unpack the more nuanced question of whether there is something disturbing about women accepting, but subordinating, their own paid work so that they can disproportionately shoulder the unpaid familial workload.

## II. WHAT'S WRONG WITH DIFFERENCE?

Because the issues raised by women who choose to forsake all paid work and women who choose to subordinate, but not forsake, paid work are different, this part addresses two different normative questions. First, are there policy reasons to discourage women from opting out of the paid workforce completely? Second, are there policy reasons to discourage two-earner households from dividing unpaid work in a traditionally gendered way?

---

57. This phenomenon also contrasts with the picture Catharine MacKinnon has traditionally painted of privileged women being the ones who were most able to challenge gender stereotypes. "The women that gender neutrality [and equal rights rhetoric] benefits . . . are mostly women who have been able to construct a biography that somewhat approximates the male norm, at least on paper. They are the qualified, the least of sex discrimination's victims." MACKINNON, *supra* note 36, at 37. Privileged women may be the least of sex discrimination's victims, but they are the ones living the most gendered lives.

58. BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 56.

59. *Id.*

60. Belkin, *supra* note 25, at 47 (quoting Sally Sears, a woman who left her television job to stay at home with her son).

### A. *The Opt-Outs*

Despite what may, given the differential amounts of work involved, seem like sound reasons for abandoning paid work if one can afford to do so, there are two reasons why policymakers should be wary of household arrangements in which one adult shoulders all of the paid work and the other shoulders virtually all of the unpaid work. The first reason has to do with the effect that this distribution of labor has on all the households that cannot afford to do it. The second has to do with how optimal a complete division of paid and unpaid labor is for the households that do it.

First, couples who choose to specialize completely, that is, couples in which women specialize in unpaid work and men specialize in paid work, are almost always elite.<sup>61</sup> The trend toward staying home, particularly staying home full time, is clearly concentrated in households that earn the most money.<sup>62</sup> As elites, these households set norms, but the norms that these households set are totally at odds with the needs, or at least desires, of the vast majority of parents who are striving to achieve some acceptable sense of balance. Most non-elite mothers work outside the home.<sup>63</sup> Most men in most dual-earner families are responsible for much more child care than they used to be.<sup>64</sup> Thus, most parents have to struggle to provide good care for their children while maintaining their paid income. The elites who fall into traditional gender roles avoid that struggle.

Even though elites are by definition a minority, they have a disproportionate impact on how public resources are allocated and on what private markets look like. When elites opt out, there is less social pressure to have programs and services that could help those struggling with work-family balance.<sup>65</sup> The impetus to have quality day care, full-day and full-year after-school and camp programs, emergency care and the like is lessened when those parents with the most financial and social capital do not need them. It is not just that our elites might pressure the government to subsidize these programs in ways that governments in most of the industrialized world

---

61. See *supra* notes 45–48 and accompanying text.

62. *Id.*

63. See Press Release, U.S. Dep't of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, News, Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006 (May 9, 2007), available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/flamee.pdf> (indicating that seventy-five percent of mothers with children under the age of eighteen work outside the home and sixty-five percent of married mothers work outside the home).

64. BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 55 (married fathers work almost twice as many hours in the home as they did in 1965); M.R. Nakhaie, *Class, Breadwinner Ideology and Housework Among Canadian Husbands*, 34 REV. RADICAL POL. ECON. 137, 152 (2002) (arguing that men in working and managerial classes do more housework than men in elite households).

65. I have written about this subject somewhat more in depth elsewhere. See Katharine K. Baker, *Supporting Children, Balancing Lives*, 34 PEPP. L. REV. 359, 385–86 (2007).

do,<sup>66</sup> it is that elite families are not asking private markets to provide any of these comprehensive services either. There is not nearly as much demand for high-quality day care as there could be because the people who could actually afford to pay for high-quality day care do not want it. When a norm is not set at the high end, it is harder to develop a cultural understanding for what quality should look like.<sup>67</sup>

By the same token, the individuals running the firms that could institute more flexible work policies are almost always supported by a spouse who specializes in unpaid work.<sup>68</sup> There is minimal internal demand for flexible scheduling, reasonable hourly requirements and emergency leave provisions when success at a firm is defined by people who have no need for these policies themselves. When we let our elites specialize, we do not have the pressure for balance that the vast majority of the workforce needs.<sup>69</sup>

Second, it is clearly the case that many women's decisions to specialize in unpaid work is a decision made only after their pleas for more manageable hours go unheeded.<sup>70</sup> One reason we should encourage women not to opt out completely is because they do not actually want to opt out com-

---

66. *Early Education and Child Care: Does the United States Measure Up?: Hearing of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions*, 107th Cong. 8 (2001) (statement of Sen. James Jeffords, Chair, S. Comm. on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions).

Of total funds spent on early education and care in the United States, government pays for 39 percent, private sources—one percent, and parents—60 percent. This is pretty much the reverse of the cost-sharing between parents and government in other industrialized nations. In all of the other industrialized nations, the costs of early education and care for 3- and 4-year-olds rests with government or employers, or a combination. Parents are responsible for a small percentage of the costs, generally in the 10- to 20-percent range.

67. See generally Cass R. Sunstein, *Social Norms and Social Roles*, 96 COLUM. L. REV. 903, 927–31 (1996) (discussing how cultural understandings of “normal” are set by elites, or at least leaders).

68. See WILLIAMS, *supra* note 38, at 77.

[S]uccessful men tend to have marriages with gender patterns that disappeared a generation ago in the bulk of the population, with wives operating virtually as single parents and not “bothering” their husbands with domestic details. “The higher up you go, the likelier it is that you will have a traditional marriage.”

(quoting ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD, *THE TIME BIND, WHEN WORK BECOMES HOME AND HOME BECOMES WORK* 61 (1997)).

69. One may question whether people really do “need” balance. Perhaps both parents only work because they have fallen victim to an overly materialistic culture. The vast amount of what the average two-parent household earns, however, goes to providing basic housing, food, clothing, healthcare and child care for their children. For a breakdown of typical household expenses, see Mark Lino, *Expenditures on Children by Families*, 2006, U.S. Dep’t of Agric., Ctr. for Nutrition Pol’y & Promotion Publ’n No. 1528-2006 (2007), available at <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Publications/CRC/crc2006.pdf>. Moreover, in a country that ties educational quality to land value, prioritizing children’s education often means buying an expensive house. It is not clear that this is materialism. Comparably, when a child’s success is often dependent on having a range of extra-curricular activities, buying lessons and enrichment activities for one’s child is often considered to be a basic part of education.

70. See WILLIAMS, *supra* note 38, at 72–73; Belkin, *supra* note 25 (management never responded to litigator’s part-time proposal).

pletely; they want the labor market to respond to their demand for part-time work. They understand what empirical evidence appears to show which is that some balance of paid and unpaid labor works best because paid work has many benefits while unpaid caretaking has many drawbacks. Numerous studies show that paid work is emotionally beneficial for mothers.<sup>71</sup> Other research shows that complete financial dependence on one's spouse can drain one's self-confidence. Formerly dependent women who are forced to provide for themselves after divorce often feel a sense of pride in providing for themselves, even at a much-reduced standard of living.<sup>72</sup>

Just as importantly, mothering can be a source of exquisite pain for women. Many contemporary women who have chosen to invest heavily in mothering are guilt-ridden, stressed and unable to make healthy distinctions between themselves and their children.<sup>73</sup> The emotional intensity that many women bring to mothering is not always enjoyable in the short-term and is often problematic in the long-term.<sup>74</sup> Exclusive motherhood is not necessarily good for mothers or children.<sup>75</sup>

Reforming the workplace so that it can more readily accommodate the flexible scheduling demands of many mothers who now opt out will afford these mothers an opportunity to live a more integrated, balanced life. As discussed, such reforms would also likely benefit the less-elite workers who need flexibility even though opting out of paid work is not an option. Some legal manipulation of the workplace may be needed because the workplace may be unnecessarily stuck in outdated beliefs about the necessity of excessive hours<sup>76</sup> and the availability of someone else to shoulder family responsibilities.<sup>77</sup> In reality, many workplaces can probably work perfectly efficiently if they incorporate part-time work and flexible schedules into their programs.<sup>78</sup> Firms that now invest considerable resources in training

71. Vicki Schultz, *Life's Work*, 100 COLUM. L. REV. 1881, 1908-12 (2000) (citing studies showing that mothers are happier when they work); ROSALINE C. BARNETT & CARYL RIVERS, *SHE WORKS, HE WORKS: HOW TWO INCOME FAMILIES ARE HAPPIER, HEALTHIER AND BETTER-OFF* 56-59 (1996) (work outside the home acts as a buffer against stresses and anxieties of parenting).

72. "Trying to be my own person, well, it's scary . . . [but t]here's a certain kind of exhilaration in taking yourself seriously, thinking about yourself as an entity, trying to be whole unto yourself." CATHERINE KOHLER REISSMAN, *DIVORCE TALK* 179-80 (1990).

73. See JUDITH WARNER, *PERFECT MADNESS: MOTHERING IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY* (2005) (describing various neuroses that seem to haunt the current generation of mothers of minor children).

74. See Becker, *supra* note 19, at 145-46 (describing the pains of motherhood, especially as children start to break away from their mothers in adolescence).

75. Studies from different cultures suggest that children may benefit from more collective child-rearing. See Katharine K. Baker, *Taking Care of Our Daughters*, 18 CARDOZO L. REV. 1495, 1518-19 (1997) (a book review of FINEMAN, *supra* note 42).

76. See WILLIAMS, *supra* note 38, at 72-75 (discussing how managers presume that one cannot do an adequate job unless one puts in a very high minimum number of hours).

77. *Id.* at 80 (explaining that many jobs provide very limited sick time, thus preventing workers who need to be home with a sick child from taking them).

78. See JOAN WILLIAMS & CYNTHIA THOMAS CALVERT, *PROGRAM ON GENDER, WORK & FAMILY, BALANCED HOURS: EFFECTIVE PART-TIME POLICIES FOR WASHINGTON LAW FIRMS: THE*

young women only to lose them to full-time motherhood can save money by developing the accommodations necessary to retain these women.<sup>79</sup> For all of these reasons, using the law to demand flexibility from the workplace seems like a good idea.<sup>80</sup> By demanding flexibility, the law will provide those who opt out with a meaningful way to stay in the labor force. More people will find accommodating workplaces, more women will be able to achieve the balance they ask for,<sup>81</sup> and more workplaces will be enriched by the continuing contributions of women who currently leave.

### *B. The Remaining Disproportionate Division of Unpaid Labor*

Even with all of the benefits that may come from more legal pressure for workplace flexibility, even if the opt-outs opt back in and the non-elites benefit from less rigid scheduling, and even if workplace training does not go to waste, current trends still suggest that women who opt back in will be doing twice as much unpaid labor in the household, while their spouses do twice as much paid work.<sup>82</sup> The lives of non-elite families may become less stressful, but little suggests that the burdens of unpaid work are likely to change. Is there a problem with that?

This is the conundrum that we left at the end of the biological explanation for the gendered division of labor. Is there something wrong with a dynamic in which men and women work almost equally as hard, but men get compensated by the market for much more of their work than women do? The discussion that follows offers a preliminary analysis of that question. Subpart 1 explains why the problem with the gendered division of unpaid labor cannot be that women do not get paid. Subpart 2 suggests that if there is a problem with the disproportionate division of unpaid labor, it lies in the ramifications for future women who may not want to live with a gendered norm that seriously undermines their ability to compete with men.

#### *1. It's Not About Money*

On its face, women's disproportionate burden of unpaid work seems problematic because money brings power and status. Men get paid more money, therefore they get more power and status than women. What makes the analysis so puzzling, though, is that when one tries to solve this money

---

PROJECT FOR ATTORNEY RETENTION, FINAL REPORT 52 (2d ed. 2001), available at <http://www.pardc.org/Publications/BalancedHours2nd.pdf>.

79. See Joan C. Williams, *The Politics of Time in the Legal Profession*, 4 U. ST. THOMAS L.J. 343, 379 (2007).

80. For a more skeptical perspective on whether workplaces can really provide flexibility without incurring real cost, see Michael Selmi, *The Work-Family Conflict: An Essay of Employers, Men and Responsibility*, 4 U. ST. THOMAS L.J. 343, 573 (2007) (suggesting that the empirical data is mixed on how much employers can benefit from more flexible scheduling).

81. See Lino, *supra* note 69.

82. See BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 66, 176.

problem by giving women more access to money, men still retain more power and status because the allocation of roles does not change much.

There are three ways to fix the money problem with money. First, we can do more of what we have already done with other domestic work, which is to send it out to a specialized market so that women can buy domestic services and spend more time earning money. Second, we can pay women with public money, such as a government subsidy, for the work they do in the home. Third, we can force men to compensate women for the unpaid labor, from which men benefit. Surprisingly, none of these solutions eliminates the gendered division of labor.

As mentioned earlier, women spend much less time each week doing unpaid housework than they did forty years ago. This reduction in hours (fifteen hours per week for married mothers)<sup>83</sup> has probably come from a combination of technological advances (for example, today, one cleans an oven by pushing a button), some reduction in standards for cleanliness,<sup>84</sup> and a significantly expanded service industry that washes more clothes, cleans more bathrooms and prepares much, much more food than before.<sup>85</sup> In the last forty years however, households have not reduced the amount of time spent in direct parenting activity. Indeed, the number of hours devoted to parenting has increased.<sup>86</sup>

The fact that parents have not reduced their child care hours in the ways they have reduced other household work suggests that there is something about child care that parents do not want to delegate to others. And of course there is. A good deal of parenting requires spending enough time with one's children to just *know* them. Part of the joy of parenting comes from having the kind of connection to a child that can only come from enough hours spent interacting. This is true whether a child is two or ten or sixteen years old. Comparably, one cannot provide the kind of emotional support a child needs after a bad soccer game, a fight with a friend or a troubling homework assignment if one does not know enough about the substance of a child's life to provide advice that is sensitive and believable. Moreover, as children grow, a good deal of parenting requires "just being there." Older children want parent-specific interaction precisely because older children want to know who their parents are, what they think, and

---

83. *Id.* at 91.

84. *Id.* at 92 (speculating that homes may be less clean today than they used to be); John P. Robinson & Melissa Milkie, *Back to the Basics: Trends in and Role Determinants of Women's Attitudes Toward Housework*, 60 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 205, 215 (1998) (suggesting women's standards for cleanliness may have declined).

85. BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 92 (referencing the tasks performed by the service industry); HAYDEN STEWART ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., *The Demand for Food Away from Home: Full-Service or Fast Food?* 4 (2004), available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aer829/aer829.pdf> (evaluating how much more food is now bought prepared).

86. See text accompanying BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* notes 1–2.



how they would handle different kinds of issues.<sup>87</sup> No one but a parent can be the person to whom older children want access. The market simply cannot provide these household services because, by definition, only a parent can.

Other aspects of parenting are similarly difficult to purchase on the market. Managing a household, particularly a household with children, is a formidable task. There are clothes to buy, doctors' appointments to schedule, aftercare and camp programs to choose among and parent-teacher conferences to attend. It does not take a great deal of time to pick up the phone to call the dentist to make an appointment for one's child, but it takes a great deal of energy to remember to do so. For the most part, it is women who perform this management function.<sup>88</sup> Women cannot delegate this work to the market because it is work that requires family-specific knowledge (such as knowing how badly the children need new clothes or the date of their last check-up) and important discretionary decision-making (such as investigating what kind of camp would be good for the children and whether to allow them to engage in certain activities). In all likelihood, this kind of labor is not even captured in time-diary studies,<sup>89</sup> so the distribution of unpaid labor is probably greater than the statistics suggest. This organizational labor, like "being there" labor and "getting-to-know" labor simply cannot be farmed out to the market.

If the solution does not lie in buying parental services in the market, then the solution could lie in recognizing that much parenting work must be done in the home and compensating the women who do it there. To a large extent, this is what family allowance programs do. Most of the industrialized world has family allowance policies that pay money directly from the state to households in which children are being raised.<sup>90</sup> Many countries also have guaranteed family leave policies, at close to full pay, to ensure that parents can leave the workforce temporarily when a child is born with-

---

87. As my sister-in-law, a mother of two teenagers put it, "you can pay someone else to put a diaper on your kid, but you can't pay someone to talk to your kid about race . . . or sex." Interview with Tracy Baker-White (Dec. 2006).

88. BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 170 ("[M]others' greater subjective sense of time pressures may derive from their being the one who continues to orchestrate family life."). As Dorothy Roberts has analyzed, women have performed this household managerial function in this country at least since the nineteenth century, even when they were wealthy enough to delegate virtually all of the menial housework to others. Dorothy E. Roberts, *Spiritual and Menial Housework*, 9 YALE L. J. & FEMINISM 51 (1997). See also Katharine C. Silbaugh, *Marriage Contracts and the Family Economy*, 93 NW. U. L. REV. 65, 102-08 (1998) (explaining that women perform most of the household specific labor—planning, counseling, companionship—that is particularly hard to monetarily value).

89. BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 170 (explaining that women's greater acceptance of family organizational tasks is "a reality that is difficult to capture in time-diary data").

90. Lee Rainwater & Timothy Smeeding, *Doing Poorly: The Real Income of American Children in a Comparative Perspective*, LUX. INCOME STUDY 8, 21-22 (1995).

out being too financially penalized.<sup>91</sup> In essence, these policies require employers to pay parents for being in the home.

Several Scandinavian countries also have laws that grant parents the right to work fewer hours if they choose,<sup>92</sup> making it more possible for both mothers and fathers to integrate caregiving needs with paid work. Scandinavian and some European countries also have excellent, state-subsidized child care that helps make it easier to accommodate different kinds of working schedules and undermines a norm that equates good mothering with full-time mothering.<sup>93</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, these policies do little, if anything, to equalize earnings between men and women or catapult women into top, high-paying management positions. Women are still much more likely than men to work part time in Sweden.<sup>94</sup> Although Swedish women appear more attached to the labor force than they used to be, they still opt out of paid work much more than men do.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, one is less likely to find women in top management positions in Scandinavian countries than in the United States.<sup>96</sup> As one set of researchers concluded, "[w]hat family policies undoubtedly do is make life easier for children and parents. Whether they are also good for achieving gender equality is less clear."<sup>97</sup>

In fact, it seems clear that paying women for the work they do in the home does little to help achieve gender equality in the workplace. After studying women in the child care and household subsidy-rich countries of both Sweden and France, Nancy Dowd concluded, "[w]omen are [still] paid less, on the whole, than men, are concentrated in a small number of occupations, and are at the bottom of the occupational and managerial hierarchies."<sup>98</sup> In short, using public subsidies to compensate women for the work they do in the home does not appear to give women the power and prestige that men achieve by earning more money in the marketplace, and it does not appear to alter the allocation of roles within families.

Finally, then, the most equitable solution may be to have fathers pay mothers for the parenting work that mothers disproportionately do. This decreases the amount of control men have over the money that brings them power and prestige, and it allows mothers the benefits of money. This is

---

91. Eva Merysson Milgrom & Trond Petersen, *The Glass Ceiling in the United States and Sweden: Lessons from the Family-Friendly Corner of the World, 1970-1990*, in DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE, *supra* note 7, at 158.

92. CATHERINE HAKIM, *WORK-LIFESTYLE CHOICES IN THE 21ST CENTURY* 243 (2000).

93. WILLIAMS, *supra* note 38, at 49.

94. Milgrom & Petersen, *supra* note 91, at 184.

95. Using age as a proxy for experience, one finds that although the average age of women in the workforce is higher than it used to be, it is much lower than it is for males—suggesting that more women leave once they have children. *Id.* at 181–82.

96. *Id.* at 157.

97. *Id.* at 158.

98. Nancy E. Dowd, *Envisioning Work and Family: A Critical Perspective on International Models*, 26 HARV. J. ON LEGIS. 311, 336 (1989).

probably a fine idea, but it is also what already happens in the vast majority of houses that disproportionately divide unpaid labor. Most mothers share the rewards of their spouse's market earnings. They do get paid—by their husbands.

Others have analyzed how women who disproportionately invest in unpaid work are penalized at divorce because, for the most part, a man is able to take his paycheck with him.<sup>99</sup> The law still allows him to keep most of the income that he can earn. He is able to maintain or increase his standard of living after divorce, but women and children rarely do because so many women have spent so much time subordinating paid work to family work. A woman is forced to incur the economic hardship that follows from not committing herself more fully to paid work. The solution, some argue, is to equalize the standard of living in the households after divorce so that at divorce husbands do not disproportionately benefit from the unequal division of household labor.<sup>100</sup>

These shared income proposals may indeed be the fairest way to allocate revenue after divorce, but they do little for the much larger proportion of households that never divorce but still divide labor. Approximately twenty percent of first marriages end in divorce within the first five years of marriage.<sup>101</sup> Many couples do not have children before year five, and even those that do have not had time to develop an entrenched gendered division of paid and unpaid work. Only 37.5 percent of the marriages that make it past year five end in divorce.<sup>102</sup> It is the sizable majority (62.5 percent) of marriages that do not end in divorce after making it past year five that raise the most vexing questions because the women in those marriages end up sharing in their husbands' wealth until the end.

---

99. Allan Parkman, *Bargaining Over Housework*, 63 AM. J. ECON. & SOC. 765 (2004) (arguing that it is too easy for men to leave marriage without compensating women adequately); WILLIAMS, *supra* note 38, at 126 (arguing that men retain their ideal worker wages at divorce, but now do not have to share as much of them with their ex-spouse who still provides them with caretaking services); Katharine Silbaugh, *Turning Labor into Love: Housework and the Law*, 91 NW. U. L. REV. 1 (1996) (arguing that because women's household labor is not treated as real work, women are undercompensated at divorce).

100. See WILLIAMS, *supra* note 38, at 129–30 (proposing an income sharing arrangement); see also Jane Rutherford, *Duty in Divorce: Shared Income as a Path to Equality*, 58 FORDHAM L. REV. 539, 577–92 (1990) (proposing a comparable plan).

101. MATTHEW D. BRAMLETT & WILLIAM D. MOSHER, CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREV., FIRST MARRIAGE DISSOLUTION, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE: ADVANCE DATA FROM VITAL AND HEALTH STATISTICS NO. 323, at 5 (2001) (finding that twenty percent of first marriages end within the first five years, another thirteen percent have ended within ten years, another ten percent have ended within fifteen years, and another seven percent end by year twenty or after. Thus, only thirty percent of the marriages that make it past the fifth year end in divorce.). [hereinafter CDC ADVANCE DATA].

102. See *id.* (suggesting that the divorce rate for first marriages is still fifty percent, but other studies suggest that it is lower); Robert Shoen & Robin M. Weinick, *The Slowing Metabolism of Marriage: Figures from 1988 U.S. Marital Status Life Tables*, 30 DEMOGRAPHY 737, 742 (1993) (finding that the data implies a divorce rate of forty-three percent). The 37.5 percent figure assumes a fifty percent lifetime divorce rate. See CDC ADVANCE DATA, *supra* note 101, at 5.

If most of the women who do a disproportionate amount of unpaid labor in married households do get paid, albeit indirectly, for the labor they perform, then the problem with the gendered division of labor cannot be just that men get rewarded for their labor and women do not. Men may get more status from their work because it is work that a market values, but many women seem willing to forego the extra status that more paid work would bring. Most employed married mothers report feeling "very successful" in balancing work and family life.<sup>103</sup> This means that a sizable number of women are content with the choice to do less high-status work, presumably because there are some benefits that come from doing more low-status work. If most married women do get compensated for their unpaid labor and if most married women are fairly comfortable with the status tradeoffs they have made after becoming parents, what is the problem with having a gendered norm?

## 2. *It is About the Norm*

There are two potential concerns with a gendered distribution of unpaid work norm. First, it will be hard for those women who want to stray from the norm. Second, it may be difficult to even maintain the gains thus far made toward gender equality.

### a. *Challenging the Norm*

The more women and men conform to the norm, the harder it will be for those who may want to stray. If one can safely assume that some women will want to work long hours, compete at the highest levels, work to save the world or earn a lot of money, accepting a disproportionate division of unpaid work norm will hinder these women's ability to do so if they also want to be parents. If a woman wants to compete in the market and parent, she will have to demand that her spouse do a disproportionate share of unpaid work. She has to convince him that it is appropriate, fulfilling and ennobling to do twice as much unpaid work as she does. The more ubiquitous the gendered division of household labor is elsewhere, the harder time she is going to have convincing her partner to shoulder more of the domestic workload because it will require convincing him to both (i) do more unpaid work and (ii) do *less* paid work.

For self-evident reasons, it is much easier to tell women they really may want to be well-paid, high-powered professionals than it is to tell men they really may want to be low-powered househusbands whose work has never been valued. Men today do perform more unpaid work than they used to, but women still do twice as much routine child care as do men.<sup>104</sup> Stud-

---

103. BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 139 (finding that fifty-two percent of married mothers report feeling very good about the balance they have struck).

104. *Id.* at 66.

ies suggest that in the households that most approximate an equal division of household labor (which are also the households in which spouses' incomes are closest to equal), women still do approximately sixty percent of the domestic work.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, as discussed above, it appears that men do little of the invisible family organizational work that is essential to a functioning household.<sup>106</sup>

It is possible that time will simply erode the male privilege that seems to let men avoid such a large percentage of unpaid work in the home, but it is also possible that movement toward a more equal distribution will just stall, as has the movement to eliminate the wage gap.<sup>107</sup> The amount of time women spent in paid work quadrupled in the thirty years from 1965 to 1995, while the time men spent in unpaid care giving did not even double.<sup>108</sup> This pace differential cannot be explained by the decreased need for caregiving because, for the most part, the number of hours devoted to caregiving (unlike the number of hours devoted to other housework) has stayed constant.<sup>109</sup> Suzanne Bianchi and her team of time-diary analysts emphasized that men's lesser commitment to unpaid work is not about laziness—men work almost as hard as women if one combines their paid and unpaid work,<sup>110</sup> but that does not mean that the woman who wants to flip the tables and ask her spouse to accept the greater portion of low-status work will be able to do so. In short, many more women seem willing to accept the non-financial benefits of low-status work than do men. Biology may explain why women get more benefit from low-status work (they care more about children), and patriarchy may explain why women would care less about status (they are socialized to believe they do not deserve status), but if we want to honor the desires of some women not to do non-delegable, low-status family work then we have to find others who will. The stronger a norm that assumes this work will be done by women, the harder it is to convince men to do it.<sup>111</sup>

Possibly more difficult than asking men to do low-status caregiving work, though, is asking them *not* to do high-status work. Asking a man to accept the kind of unpaid work burden that the average married woman accepts will be asking him to relinquish his role as provider. As numerous scholars of gender have recognized, providing is critical to cultural under-

---

105. See generally Catherine E. Ross, *The Division of Labor at Home*, 65 SOC. FORCES 816 (1987); Julie Brines, *Economic Dependency, Gender and the Division of Labor at Home*, 100 AM. J. SOC. 652 (1994); Harriet B. Presser, *Employment Schedules Among Dual-Earner Spouses and the Division of Household Labor by Gender*, 59 AM. SOC. REV. 348 (1994); Greenstein, *supra* note 56, at 324, 333.

106. See *supra* notes 88–89 and accompanying text.

107. See *supra* notes 17–18 and accompanying text.

108. BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 90.

109. *Id.*

110. See *supra* note 32 and accompanying text; BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1.

111. See generally Sunstein, *supra* note 67, at 912 (social norms affect, if not control, peoples' willingness to behave in certain ways).

standings of fatherhood. Robert Griswold writes "[b]readwinning has remained the great unifying element in fathers' lives. Its obligations . . . shape their sense of self, manhood and gender."<sup>112</sup> Men are doing more child care than they were before, but they are not providing much less. The hours men now spend in child care have come as much from their leisure hours as their paid work hours.<sup>113</sup> Men still care a great deal about paid work. Whether one thinks the importance of men's provider identity comes from biology or culture, it has remained deeply entrenched, and it is difficult in the abstract to criticize the behavior it produces.

As providing fathers, men want to work hard, they want to be good at what they do, they want to provide for their families and be esteemed community citizens. For them, yearning to fill this role does not feel like a yearning to put someone else down or assert power over a spouse; rather, it feels like a desire to do the best job they can, to gain public esteem or at least esteem among their peers. It is not easy to ask men to give that up. And it is extraordinarily difficult to ask women to ask the men they love to give that up. A woman must ask her spouse to give up that which culturally defines him as a good father. She must ask him to give up that which, for whatever reason, brings him tremendous personal satisfaction. She must ask him to sacrifice a great deal so that she can compete as she wishes.

Like many feminist issues, this really is a question of the personal being political, but instead of being—as it was forty years ago—about sexual attitudes and the primacy of women's sexuality,<sup>114</sup> it is about who is going to drive carpool. In addition to being inherently less interesting to most people, it is a private bargaining process with obvious potential third-party casualties: children. It is hard to engage in hard bargaining when much of the work being bargained over is so invisible that it does not even get recorded in time diaries. It is hard to demand change from a male provider norm that looks to the outside world, and feels to the father fulfilling it, noble. It is, for many, simply unthinkable to engage in a game of chicken when walking away might mean that one's children will not be picked up from school, brought to the dentist on time or helped with their homework each night.

---

112. ROBERT L. GRISWOLD, *FATHERHOOD IN AMERICA: A HISTORY* 2 (1993). See Joseph H. Pleck, *Husband's Paid Work and Family Roles: Current Research Issues*, in *THE INTERWEAVE OF SOCIAL ROLES, FAMILIES AND JOBS* 251, 305 (Helena Z. Lopata & Joseph H. Pleck eds., 1983) ("[T]he breadwinner role is socially defined as men's primary family role.").

113. BIANCHI ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 90–91. Moreover, there is some indication that the decrease in total paid work hours for men is more attributable to the men who have left the paid labor force altogether, not to men who have decreased their paid work hours in order to devote more time to unpaid work. See Paula England, *Toward Gender Equality: Progress and Bottle-necks*, in *DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE*, *supra* note 7, at 245, 251–52.

114. SARA EVANS, *PERSONAL POLITICS* 83–101 (1980); JO FREEMAN, *THE POLITICS OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION* 43–70 (1975) (describing the growing feeling of women in the civil rights movement that they were not being respected for their political and organizational contributions and were being treated primarily as sexual objects).

Professor Paula England has suggested that the most dramatic change in living patterns and gender dynamics in the last fifty years has not been about women entering the labor force, or single mothers, or divorce, per se; it has been "the reduction in the proportion of the typical adult life spent co-residing with a person of the other sex."<sup>115</sup> In other words, as women have begun demanding more power and more respect, the genders have split up. This does not bode well for the bargaining process. People are walking away from each other, not coming to agreement. That is a very bad option if children are already in the picture. Divorce is extraordinarily difficult financially and emotionally for women, and most research suggests that it is not good for children either.<sup>116</sup> The fact that women with an espoused commitment to gender equality might rather provide their children with a gendered, two-parent household rather than a nongendered single-parent household is hardly surprising. If, as a parent, one is put in a bargaining position in which it seems that one's choices are to walk away or to accept the carpool duty, it is very likely that one will decide to drive the carpool. It is by far the least "worst" option.

None of this is that large of a problem, though, if most women do not care about having a spouse who does a greater share of unpaid work. If most women who can *imagine* a world in which they are free to do more paid work—because their spouse would do more unpaid work—*would still choose* not to do more paid work, then there are not really that many women hurt by the gendered disproportionate division of unpaid work norm. If there are only a few women who do aspire to both parent and compete at the highest levels, then perhaps the law need not be concerned. Although these women will have a hard row to hoe, their numbers are small.

### *b. Erosion of Progress*

If we simply accept the gendered disproportionate burden of unpaid work norm, however, the substantial equality gains that women have already achieved may be jeopardized. Women have made great strides in the last forty years. It is not just that they have entered the workforce in such great numbers; at all but the top levels, they both compete and win. In 1968, forty-three percent of college freshman were women. Today, fifty-five per-

---

115. England, *supra* note 113, at 254.

116. In addition to divorce being difficult financially for women and children, see *supra* notes 99–100 and accompanying text, single mothers report much less satisfaction in being able to balance work and family obligations. See *supra* notes 49–50 and accompanying text. Most research also confirms that children are better off being raised in a two-parent household than a single-parent household. See generally, JUNE CARBONE, FROM PARTNERS TO PARENTS: THE SECOND REVOLUTION IN FAMILY LAW 111–18 (2000) (discussing research on how children fare in single-parent households).

cent of college freshman are women.<sup>117</sup> In 1965, women constituted seven percent of first year medical students and four percent of law school graduates. In 2006, they constituted about forty-nine percent of both medical<sup>118</sup> and law school graduates.<sup>119</sup> Women who have committed themselves to this kind of educational course often become wonderful first, second and third year law firm associates, medical residents and business consultants. They are men's equals in these fields, they know they are men's equals, and they do very well. Then, they have children, and a huge number of women stop competing anywhere near as hard. If, as a culture, we simply come to accept the gendered division of unpaid caretaking norm, how long is it going to be before women stop competing earlier?<sup>120</sup> How long are women going to compete and think of themselves as equals if they know they are going to stop playing at that level? If women know they are going to work five hundred hours less in the years that matter later,<sup>121</sup> why compete so hard earlier?<sup>122</sup>

The concern that women may stop trying so hard to prove they are equal is related to the concern that the workplace will stop treating them equally. If women's less ambitious work patterns continue, labor markets may return to the practice of suspecting that female laborers are less stable investments as workers. In the last thirty years, the law has made clear that employers cannot assume that women are incapable of performing tradi-

---

117. U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES: 1968, No. 189, at 129 (1968); U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES: 2007, at 177 tbl.274 (2007).

118. Association of American Medical Colleges, *FACTS: Applicants, Matriculants and Graduates* tbl.4 (2006), <http://www.aamc.org/data/facts/2006/2006school.htm> (showing that women constituted 48.6 percent of medical school graduates in 2006).

119. Joyce Gannon, *Firms Teach Women Lawyers Importance of Networking to Climb Law Firm Ladder*, PITT. POST-GAZETTE, Oct. 18, 2006 ("[T]he number of female law school graduates is about 49 percent annually.").

120. Some reports indicate that women keep competing while they are young because entrance into the world of elite wage earners is critical to finding the best partner, and/or an important step in qualifying oneself as a good mother. See Louise Story, *Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 20, 2005, at A1 (undergraduate women at Yale say that they plan to finish graduate school but then marry and stay home with their children because that is the best way to be a mother). There is, however, some indication that the educational community may chafe at being used as a "finishing school" in this way. See *id.* (former Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Harvard commenting that "[i]t really does raise this question for all of us and for the country: when we work so hard to open academics and other opportunities for women, what kind of return do we expect to get for that?").

121. See Hartmann et al., *supra* note 7, at 126.

122. It is also possible that women work so hard in college and graduate school because the educational process is inherently rewarding and women want an education for education's sake. Professional schools, to which women have flocked in the last forty years, seem like a curious choice to make if what many women really want is simply a complete education. Moreover, given the vast subsidization of education by both private and public sources (the federal government allocated over seventy-six billion dollars in student financial assistance in 2006; see U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES: 2007, at 179 tbl.279 (2007)), policy-makers may reconsider whether policy goals support subsidizing those who are pursuing an education only for its inherent value.



tionally male jobs<sup>123</sup> and employers cannot discriminate against women on the basis of pregnancy,<sup>124</sup> the ability to become pregnant,<sup>125</sup> or motherhood.<sup>126</sup> These anti-discrimination laws were necessary, supposedly, because employers made baseless assumptions about how pregnancy and motherhood rendered women unable to work as hard or as well as men. Ideally, once laws like this have been in place long enough to help eradicate stereotypical, but inaccurate, assumptions about qualification, the market itself should ensure equality as employers simply look for the best people to do the necessary jobs.<sup>127</sup>

In light of these laws, it has become virtually impossible for an employer to ask a potential employee about her plans for parenthood. Any such conversation could be used as evidence in a subsequent gender discrimination lawsuit because it would suggest that the employer was treating the applicant differently if she planned to, or had become, a mother. How long can we continue to expect employers not to treat mothers differently, though, when so much of the current data suggests that many mothers behave differently as employees? On average, mothers choose to work less hard at paid work than their male counterparts. Can the norms the law has set with regard to equal treatment withstand the rational pull of the market to allow firms to make statistically accurate assumptions about the likelihood of productivity? If women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-nine really do work five hundred hours less per year on average than men, why can't employers take that into account?

Ironically, given the number of women who choose to pursue a high-status career and stay childless, the people with the greatest desire to reinstitute the employer questioning with regard to parenthood may be women themselves—not the ones who plan to become pregnant, but the ones who do not.<sup>128</sup> If employers do start making statistically accurate predictions about the chances of women working less hard than men, it will be the childless women who do plan to work just as hard as men who will want the

---

123. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. 88-352, § 703 (codified as amended by the Civil Rights Act of 1991 at 42 U.S.C. § 2000e (2000)).

124. Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e(k) (2000) ("The terms 'because of sex' or 'on the basis of sex' include, but are not limited to, because of or on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions . . .").

125. *U.A.W. v. Johnson Controls, Inc.*, 499 U.S. 187 (1991) (stating that a company cannot exclude fertile women because exposure to lead might hurt fetuses).

126. *Phillips v. Martin Marietta Corp.*, 400 U.S. 542 (1971) (Title VII does not permit employers to treat mothers with small children differently than fathers with small children.).

127. Francine D. Blau et al., *The Declining Significance of Gender?*, in *DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE*, *supra* note 7, at 3, 10 ("[C]ompetitive forces will eliminate statistical discrimination when it is based on erroneous inferences about group differences . . .").

128. See Deborah L. Rhode, *Perspectives on Professional Women*, 40 *STAN. L. REV.* 1163, 1187 (1988) (arguing that professional women are forced to choose between work and family, while men can have both).

employer to ask more questions so they can distinguish themselves from the workers with children.

### III. CONCLUSION

Whether one adheres more to the biological or the patriarchal explanation for the gendered distribution of unpaid work, the analysis presented here suggests that it is time for everyone concerned about the integration of work and family life to start asking the normative questions and articulating a normative vision. If the goal, as some people (including feminists) say, is to give women choices—choices about whether to have children, choices about whether to do paid work, choices about whether to do more caretaking than their spouse—then we must recognize that different choices have different consequences, not just for the women who make the choices, but for the gender norms that are reified when women choose to do more unpaid work. The more women who choose a more traditional allocation of work, the harder it will be for women who do not wish to make the same choice. On the other hand, if the goal, as some people (including feminists) say, is to eliminate a gendered division of work, then more radical and probably unpleasant measures are necessary. The analysis presented here suggests that much, if not all, of the fight for less gendered distributions of unpaid work needs to take place in the home. It is there that the unpaid work is performed. It is there, where children are needy and everyone is busy. It is the home, where love is required and love is enjoyed, that needs to be the locus of the struggle. Few people look forward to that.